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SUBJECT: BAGHDAD EPRT REPORTS THAT SHIA SHEIKHS FEEL IGNORED, SEEK FORMER ROLE AS BROKERS

Classified By: EPRT Leader Eric Whitaker, Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a Baghdad 2 BCT EPRT reporting cable.

¶2. (C) Summary: Shia Sheikhs in Baghdad's 9 Nissan district regard themselves as capable of resolving conflict, despite their stated belief that they have been ignored by the Iraqi government, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and Coalition Forces (CF) following the fall of Saddam Hussein. During a series of reconciliation meetings held at the end of July, Shia tribal leaders told EPRToffs that they wish to play their traditional role as community problem solvers, and asked that their word be taken seriously with respect to the innocence or guilt of individuals. With moral and financial support, they claimed that they could reduce violence and allow services to be implemented in their communities. They said that JAM is a political movement, with some violent cells, and that Iran remains an enemy of Iraq. Iraqi National Police (NP) Brigadier General Ammer said that the ISF and CF respected the sheikhs, and would listen to them, but that violence had to decrease in order for projects to be implemented. Brigade Combat Team (BCT) Leader said that CF holds detainees based on evidence, often including videos of their involvement in mortar or rocket attacks. He added that contractors would not carry out projects without CF security being present. Finally, the BCT Leader underscored the importance of cooperation in rooting out Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). End summary.

Sheikhs: We Can Mediate, Despite Being Ignored 4 Years

¶3. (C) At a lengthy meeting on July 28 with 27 Shia Sheikhs from Baghdad's 9 Nissan district, the Sheikhs said the following:

-- CF have not asked for the input or participation of the Sheikhs, despite four years of conflict. Nonetheless, they stood up for their neighborhoods. They need support for tribes in 9 Nissan.

-- A house is weak without a strong foundation (recitation of Koranic verses), and the Sheikhs believe that they are the foundation. "We have not been asked for cooperation since the fall of Saddam Hussein. You have to deal with us." Sheikhs have been marginalized, they said, and not respected.

-- In the past, security forces would come to the Sheikhs to ask for their views. They want to supervise some security activities.

-- "You should value a Sheikh's word regarding someone's guilt or innocence." In one case, they sought to earn respect by detaining a school director , having a Sheikh

declare him to be innocent, and then releasing him.

-- "You need more involvement with us, not just on infrastructure projects. We all want the country to move forward. Come to our area to see it. There are displaced people, and we need an IDP committee to identify them and meet their needs."

-- "Thanks to President Bush for taking away Saddam Hussein. Thank you one thousand times." The Sheikhs said that they sent an envoy to military commanders in 2003; there was a tribal council with 71 branches. "We believe in an Iraq for Iraqis, with no Shia or Sunni. We need to control ourselves, to be nice to neighbors and loyal to our tribes." They said that they have been asking for a hospital for two years, and claimed that nothing they have asked for has been carried out. "If you back us, there is nothing we cannot do."

-- "During the time of Saddam Hussein, we asked to be a part of the army. Today, we want services and assistance for 9 Nissan) who will be held responsible? We can mediate; we have the support of the people but need your backing." After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Sheikhs said, they were asked to establish committees. They want to fulfill the traditional role of sheikhs, and to resolve local issues. Iran is forever an enemy, the stated; even though we have a religion in common, Iranians hate Iraqis and Arabs. JAM is a political movement, they said, and one cannot accuse it in general, but only some cells within it that are violent.

-- "We should not call the CF occupiers, as they rid us of Saddam Hussein and control the money. We should cooperate with them; they are not the enemy. What are they getting out of this? We should trust the Americans."

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-- "If we have no problems, the CF has no business in our mulhallaahs (neighborhoods)."

-- "We have lists of foreigners in our communities; some rent houses, and in one case I took my men and raided a house, freeing four who had been kidnapped." They said that locals often make false statements because of personal vendettas; due to this practice, information on those whom the CF detains should be cross-referenced. Some people who are neutral are detained, they said. "However, if my son does something bad, detain him; detain me, too) I will be responsible and lose my name."

-- Sheikh Al-Timimi noted that one should be careful when one vouches for others, lest one become an accessory.

-- "You have spent time with us, but let us be clear: we are not the solution; it is somewhere else. We will meet with other Sheikhs tomorrow, and will do what we can. Through our efforts we can complement each other."

-- Sheikh Al-Timimi said that Sheikhs did not have immunity, and cannot move around at will. Weapons are taken from cars while at checkpoints, and Sheikhs cannot tell the CF present at checkpoints about ISF abuses. .

Timimi: Ramadi Success Due to Financial, Moral Support

¶4. (C) At the conclusion of the meeting, Sheikh al-Timimi said that the Sheikhs and the BCT could discuss alternatives. He said success in Ramadi had resulted from financial and moral support for Sheikhs there, who divided areas into sectors, with Sheikhs being responsible for each one to monitor activities. If the BCT were amenable, a similar plan could be implemented in 9 Nissan in coordination with the ISF.

Ammer: Take Advantage of U.S. Experience, Experts, Funds

¶ 15. (C) Brig. General Ammer said that he wanted to nominate 9 Nissan residents to be hired as new jobs opened up. Paperwork can be furnished to assist sheikhs in getting through checkpoints more easily. The police need the help of the Sheikhs, he said, and asked that they consider the ISF to be "your brothers, sons, or cousins. We respect sheikhs; let us work together. We have to deal with the Americans; some have refused, but we need to cooperate for the good of Iraq, of 9 Nissan." The Ministry of Health has a budget, Ammer said, but refuses to implement projects in the Sheikhs' area; the CF is here, Ammer explained, and wants to do projects. The State Department representative is here, with the "mind of one million people." He said that meetings such as this foster better relations, and that the EPRT, CF and ISF representatives had listened to the Sheikhs. "Don't see us just when someone is detained," Ammer concluded, "claiming that all are innocent. Let us take advantage of U.S. experience, experts, and money to build projects so that your children have safe water to drink."

EPRT: Culture, Dialogue, Peace-Building Activities Key

¶ 16. (C) EPRT Team Leader Whitaker recognized the Sheikhs' role as traditional leaders and spokesmen for their communities. Stating that both the CF and the Sheikhs seek stability and normalcy at the level of the family, he said the difference is in the methods employed. He explained the purpose of EPRTs in supporting grassroots economic and political development, and pointed out that both required a foundation of security as a starting point. The Team Leader said that Iraq's 6,000 years of history had resulted in longstanding cultural characteristics that could be used to build peace and stability. Dialogue and peace-building activities will bear benefits for all, he concluded, and the process started today should continue.

BCT Commander Explains CF Point of View, Warns
re AQI

¶ 17. (C) BCT Commander Col. Bannister commended Iraq's soccer win. He mentioned a recent mortar attack on FOB Rustimayah, but noted that overall attacks against the CF in 9 Nissan were decreasing. "It is hard for people to maintain the innocence of detainees," he explained, "when we have videos of rocket launches." He said that people were tired of

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Al-Qaida in Al Anbar province, and that the Sheikhs there had "awakened," and cleared them out. This is also taking place in western Baghdad, he added, with the involvement of Sheikhs. Once stability and security are present, as sought by the Baghdad Security Plan, services can be expanded. People want a good life for their children, the BCT Commander said; security is necessary to bring jobs. He referred to a recent job fair in west Baghdad, which 3,000 people attended to obtain information about 1,500 jobs.

¶ 18. (C) The BCT Commander noted that one sheikh had asked that U.S. forces stay out of the mulhallahs. He pointed out that contractors implementing public services projects would not go there if CF were not present to ensure their security. Security permitting, the BCT plans to place a generator in the Kamaliya neighborhood to address the needs of 58 businesses surveyed there. Developing contacts with the Sheikhs is important, he said, as working with neighborhood and district council members is not sufficient. Col. Bannister said he understood their concerns about personal vendettas and the detentions of those they believed innocent;

he emphasized that the CF did not hold people without strong evidence. He also said the Baghdad Security Plan had resulted in changes in laws regarding weapons, and that he would furnish revised guidance.

¶ 9. (C) AQI does not want Iraq to succeed, the BCT Commander said, and was behind two vehicle-borne IEDs with massive casualties within an hour of Iraq's soccer win. The CF, on the other hand, had hardened markets in 9 Nissan and Rusafa to ensure that such incidents did not happen in those districts. "We need to focus on Al-Qaida," he said, "but militia activity is causing the focus to shift away from it."

There are cells among the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) that are militant, with links to Iran, who shoot mortars and rockets at the CF, causing us to stop implementing projects. "Like a roller coaster, we keep approaching the top, only to be pulled back down. If security improved, projects could go forward and progress could be made quickly." He explained that the BCT seeks to help Iraq, and that Brig. General Ammer "is my brother in that effort; my men die trying to bring basic services to the citizens of Baghdad."

Ammer: Info Good; Sheikhs Will Say More Individually

¶ 10. (C) Following the meeting, in a separate discussion, Brig. General Ammer said the day's event had generated useful insights. All of the Sheikhs have information, he added, although they will not speak in front of the group. Several said they wished to speak further with him. The participants had furnished three names, and would probably assist further.

NP Brig. Gen. Ammer: Why the IEDs, Rockets?

¶ 11. (C) Brig. General Ammer, when he opened the day's discussion, addressed improvised explosive devices (IEDs). He asked why there were IEDs in 9 Nissan on the day of the meeting? Residents formerly had respect for the police, he said. "Why are rockets launched from 9 Nissan into the IZ? The Iraqi government is there, and the rockets are traced from the area." He said that he hoped the Sheikhs could explain the situation.
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